

THE INCREASE OF THE REDEEMER'S KINGDOM.

A Sermon

DELIVERED ON TUESDAY MORNING, JUNE 24, 1851,

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AT ST. MARGARET'S CHURCH, LOTHBURY.

"And Moses said unto him, Enviest thou for my sake? would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!"—NUMBERS xii. 29.

WHEN the great lawgiver, Moses, found the management of the whole congregation of Israel a burden heavier than he could bear, he was directed by God to select seventy elders of the people, and to bring them up with him to the tabernacle; God declaring that he would take of the Spirit which was on Moses, and put it on those elders, that they might be devoted with him to the discharge of public affairs. Seventy elders were accordingly selected; and two of them remained—probably through some accident—in the camp, whilst the others set themselves round about the tabernacle. The Spirit of the Lord came down according to promise; but it was not only on the sixty-eight elders who were at the tabernacle, but also on Eldad and Medad, who were in the camp; so that all the seventy simultaneously prophesied. It seems to have been accounted a very surprising thing that men should prophesy in the camp: it would have been nothing had Eldad and Medad prophesied in the tabernacle. Such an occurrence was not looked for elsewhere; and therefore we read—"And there ran a young man, and told Moses, Eldad and Medad do prophesy in the camp." On hearing this, Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of Moses, immediately exclaims—"My lord Moses, forbid them." And what feeling was uppermost in Joshua's mind, that he was so prompt in desiring that these prophets might be forbidden to prophesy? Why, he was jealous lest men should be held supreme in the camp, whatever they might be in the tabernacle: that men should prophesy in the camp, seemed an invasion of the province of Moses. Now, the sudden exclamation of Joshua, was an exclamation of jealousy; and that we do not wrong him in putting this interpretation on his words is evident from the noble answer of Moses—an answer which, at the same time, exhibited the magnanimity of the lawgiver, and expressed a feeling of devotedness to the service of his Lord—the answer in our text—"And Moses said unto him, Enviest thou for my sake? would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!"

Moses had no share in the narrow feelings which Joshua had displayed,—feelings of envy and jealousy. He had no wish to engross the distinctions of Israel, but, on the contrary, he would have greatly rejoiced had all the congregation been richly endowed from above, though he himself might have ceased to have been conspicuous in Israel. We consider that the lawgiver Moses, when so finely reproving Joshua for envying for his sake, is worthy of being intensely admired and earnestly imitated; for that, in thus showing himself above all littleness of mind and contempt of this world, so that God might be magnified and his cause advanced, he reached a point of moral heroism—ay, far loftier than that at which he stood when, in the exercise of superhuman power, he bade darkness cover the land of Egypt, or the waters of the Red Sea divide before Israel.

We are not about to expatiate at any length on the magnanimity thus displayed by Moses. We have adopted the instance in order to show you how direct a parallel may be found in the history of the forerunner of our Lord, John the Baptist—to whose commemoration the Church dedicates this day. So soon as the Saviour entered on the ministry, the great office of John was at an end. John still continued to baptize, and thus prepare men for the disclosures of that fuller revelation with which Christ was charged. In this way the ministry of our Lord and that of his forerunner were for a while discharged together; though, inasmuch as Christ wrought miracles, and John did not, there was quickly, as might be expected, more attendance on the preaching of the Redeemer, than on that of the Baptist. Now, this appears exactly the point when in truth John's disciples, who, like Joshua, were jealous of the honour of their master, thought Jesus intrenching upon his province. You see how soon the spirit of partizanship found its way into the Christian Church. No marvel! if men afterwards said, "I am of Paul, and I of Apollos;"—no marvel if in later times men have lost sight of the great High Priest, in their zeal to exalt some favourite pastor, since even the success of our Lord was viewed with jealousy by the disciples of John. You read, "they come unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou bearest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come unto him." There is an implied censure on John, as though by bearing witness in favour of Jesus, he had necessarily exposed himself to the being thought less of and forsaken. But the Baptist himself had no share in this feeling; for he immediately answered and said—"A man may receive nothing except it be given from heaven." His commission had proceeded from God; its nature, extent, and duration had been settled by divine appointment—was it, then, for him to repine that nothing higher had been assigned? was it not, rather, for him to be thankful that so much had been vouchsafed? And, however galling it might be to his followers thus to see their master neglected, to John himself it was matter of great gladness that He, whom he had heralded, was thus drawing all men towards him. His heart was in his office; and nothing would rejoice him more than to see that that Being had come, not "as the voice of one crying in the wilderness," but that public attention had been excited, and had fastened itself where he wished to have it centered. "He that is with you (he goes on to say) is the bridegroom." It was not for me to draw around me a church; I am not he who is to bring sinners into a close and abiding relationship with himself, giving himself for them, and making them one through a mystic union with himself. "The friend of the bridegroom which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly, because of the bridegroom's voice, then my joy, therefore, is fulfilled." As though he had said to his envious followers—"Think not that it is any source of regret to me that men are leaving my discipleship to flock to that of Christ; I came not as the bridegroom, but only as the bridegroom's friend; to bid the bride prepare herself for the coming of her lord. What, then, can be matter of joy to me if not to hear the voice of the bridegroom, the bridegroom proving that I have not been a false messenger? And as I see the bride is ready to receive him; I see that not in vain did I give notice of his approach. 'This my joy, therefore, is fulfilled.' The tidings which you bring me satisfy my most ardent longings; and, in place of being depressed, I greatly exult." And then the Baptist takes occasion to assure his disciples that what had moved their jealousy and displeasure was but the beginning—the first display of a growing spirit to which no bounds could be set. They were not to imagine that there could be any alteration in the relative positions of Jesus and John; nor that John would ever take that part of which, in strange forgetfulness of his own sayings, they seemed to wish to come to pass. On the contrary, he wished them distinctly to understand that, being only of earth—a mere man like one of themselves—he must decline in importance, and at length shrink altogether into insignificance. Whereas Christ, as coming from above, and

therefore being above all—possessing a divine nature as well as a human, and consequently liable to no decay—would go on discharging his high office, enlarging his sway according to the prediction of Isaiah—"To the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom." And all this gradual fading away of himself, and this continued exaltation of Christ, the Baptist gathers into one powerful and comprehensive sentence, saying of our blessed Lord—"He must increase, but I must decrease."

And what we now ask of you is, whether he who could thus advocate the glory of his Master; who could show a perfect indifference in regard of himself and his position, so that his Lord and Master might be honoured and exalted,—whether he did not display precisely the same nobleness of mind as did Moses in our text;—whether the Baptist, whom the Church this day commemorates, did not in saying of Christ, "He must increase but I must decrease," rival Moses, the great type of the Redeemer himself, when he nobly exclaimed—"Enviest thou for my sake? would to God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them."

And now, suppose we consider more distinctly how character was here put to the proof; or in what respects either Moses or John deserve imitation. The truth is, that it is natural to all of us to envy the growing reputation of others; and to be jealous where it seems likely to trench upon our own. We may speak very justly of the littleness of mind which is displayed by the envious and the jealous; nevertheless this littleness of mind belongs naturally to most, if not all of us. And he wins a fine triumph, or displays great command over himself, who can be content with inferiority provided the cause of God and truth be advanced. Now, this is precisely the case in which both Moses and John showed greatness of soul. And though it be one in which we have most reason to look for a forgetfulness of self, experience shows that the expectation is but too often disappointed. In other cases we can hardly wonder that men should be mortified by the superiority of their rivals; that is, look with dislike and bitterness on those who eclipse them in the respects in which they most wish to shine. The courtier, for example, who has long sought to stand high in the favour of his sovereign; and who perceives that a younger candidate, who has just entered the field, is fast outstripping him, so that the probability is that he will soon be widely distanced,—we cannot marvel if he regard the youthful competitor with irritated feelings in place of generously rejoicing in his rapid success. It would be a very fine instance of magnanimity if this courtier were to cede gracefully the place to his rival, and offer him, with marks of sincerity which could not be mistaken, his congratulations on having passed him in the race. But we could not look for such magnanimity. The occasion, if we may venture to say so, scarcely warrants it; the whole business is of so worldly, so ignoble a character, that the high principles of religion can scarcely be supposed to be brought into exercise; yet the loftiness of spirit is such as that these principles alone can be considered adequate to produce or effect. The case, however, is widely different when it is in the service of God, and not of an earthly king, that the two men engage. Hereby the very nature of the service, the grand thing aimed at is the glory of God and not personal distinction or aggrandisement; and there is therefore ground for expecting that if God's glory be promoted, there will be gladness of heart in all Christians, whoever the agent who has been specially honored. But, alas! for the infirmity of human nature; there is no room for questioning that even Christians can be jealous of each other, and feel it a sore trial when they are distanced and eclipsed in being instrumental in promoting Christianity. I can imagine to myself a missionary settlement, where a devoted servant of God has striven for many years with idolatry, but has made but little way in winning heathens to the faith. Here and there he can point to a convert from superstition, but, for the most part, he seems to have laboured in vain; and is forced to exclaim with the prophet, "Who hath believed our report, and to whom

hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?" And then there arrives in that missionary settlement, another and a younger preacher of truth, and God has endowed him with higher powers, and honours him with greater success, so that there is a rapid demolition of the whole system of heathenism—savages renouncing by hordes ancestral superstitions; forming themselves into peaceful communities, and embracing, with delight, the religion of Jesus Christ. It is very easy to say that the elder missionary ought to feel nothing but exultation and thankfulness, as he witnesses the glorious results which follow the labours of youth. The object that he had nearest his heart was the conversion of Pagans; what should he do but rejoice in the accomplishment of his object, though effected through the instrumentality of another? And we do not say that the elder missionary would have other feelings than those which he is bound, by his profession to entertain; nevertheless, there will have been a great deal to try that missionary, and we can hardly doubt—forasmuch as his having been a Christian will not have destroyed his being a man—that his breast must have been the scene of no inconsiderable struggle; that there must have been earnest prayer, and earnest resistance to natural feelings, ere he could bring himself to survey, with composure, the distinguished honours which God is putting on another. We are far enough from regarding it as a matter of course, that a veteran in the missionary work, would feel contented and pleased at seeing that work which had gone on so slowly with himself, progress with amazing rapidity when undertaken by a younger labourer; on the contrary, arguing from the known tendencies of our nature, we assume that he must have had a hard battle with himself before he could really rejoice in the sudden advance of Christianity; and we should regard him as having won, through the assistance of Divine grace, a noble victory over some of the strongest cravings of the heart when he frankly bid the stripling, God speed! and rejoiced as he saw the idols fall prostrate before him.

Here you have very nearly the case of Moses and John. We will confine ourselves to that of John, as brought before us by the services of the day. You are to remember that John had filled a most distinguished place as the forerunner of Christ. Prophets had spoken of him long ages back, and angels had announced his birth, and miracles suspended for centuries, had again been wrought to fix attention on the child. And when he had grown up and entered upon the ministry, the whole empire of the Jews was agitated by his preaching, so that multitudes of every class "flocked to him, and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins," Was it nothing to John, regarding him as a man of like passions with ourselves, to become suddenly unimportant, after having occupied so eminent a station? Or would it have cost one of us no great effort, after we had held such a post as had been reached by the Baptist, to shrink into comparative insignificance, and leave the scene clear for one mightier than ourselves. There is no better way of estimating a display of magnanimity than that of making the circumstances, as much as possible, our own, and then examine whether we can imitate conduct which we can but admire. If we have not overstated the case of the missionary, we may safely declare that not one amongst ourselves would find few trials harder than that of seeing himself wholly eclipsed;—that he might bring himself, with less difficulty, to go through the trials of any duty, than to see another useful, whilst he himself had been passed by. Never, then, as we have said of Moses—never was the Baptist more glorious; never did he more exhibit greatness of soul than when he finely disclaimed all share in the petty jealousy shown by his followers, and proved that he exulted in being nothing in comparison of Christ. The absence of all feeling of rivalry, is displayed in a thorough willingness to be just what God pleased—eminent or forgotten, according as his purposes might require, and praising God that one greater than himself had assumed the office of teacher of the people. In this have we finer proof than in all the rest of his history, that the Baptist had subdued himself, and had thus gained the hardest as well as the most important of all moral

victories. And I can admire John the Baptist as he lives a severe life in the desert—his raiment of camel's hair, a leathern girdle about his loins, and mortifying the flesh, and thus exhibiting to others that self-denial which he was charged to preach; I can admire him, when, according to the statement of the Collect, he "boldly reprov'd vice" in the great, daring even the terrors of a prison, rather than leave undenounced the crimes of the profligate Herod; but never does he appear so transcendantly great,—never so free from the dross of human passion and infirmity as when I see him surrounded by his followers, who have come with jealous and angry feelings to tell him how the world is flocking after Jesus, and hear him exclaim in a fine burst of pleasure and gratitude—"He must increase, but I must decrease," thus emulating the great lawgiver of Israel, who was not so noble when he showed mastery over the proud foes of his people as when he showed mastery over himself; saying to Joshua, jealous that others should share his greatness—"Enviest thou for my sake? would to God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them."

And now, having shown you how admirable was the Baptist in thus copying the lawgiver Moses, we would speak on the peculiar appropriateness of his being, though the forerunner of Christ, compared with Moses, inasmuch as John belonged strictly neither to the legal nor the Christian dispensation, but stood between the two. The time was not come for the full manifestation of God's purpose to man, and therefore, though the Baptist might urge the abandoning vice and the following after righteousness, he could not wield those weapons which are mighty through God to the casting down of strongholds. He could not animate by the promises of the Gospel, nor show with minuteness and accuracy, how all the terrors of hell could be poured on sin, while all the glories of heaven were open to the sinner. And probably this peculiarity of his position—as standing between Moses and Christ—may have had to do with the words which he employed, when so beautifully imitating one, and doing homage to the other. He well knew that he had not taught the great truths which were to be revealed under both dispensations; he well knew that his baptism had been only introductory; that the mortification of the flesh and the performance of moral duties, to which he had urged, could not secure men from the wrath denounced against their sins, and that consequently, unless he were to be followed by one charged with a clearer revelation of mercy, his mission would be fruitless to save the world, which he found under a sentence of death. Therefore was it far enough from his wish that he should not be displaced or surpassed by a teacher from God. It would have been no pleasure to him that he had communicated all the intelligence which God intended to give in regard of his purposes toward a fallen race, and that he whom he had been sent to announce would teach no higher lessons, and unfold no better hopes. On the contrary, it was his gladness to feel that his own ministrations were but as the twilight which should be lost in the full blaze of day; and that when the Sun of Righteousness, to which he had served as the morning star, should pour his rich beams on the world, then himself must decline and at length vanish out of sight. Could it have been with any emotions of regret that he received the intelligence brought him by his disciples—intelligence that Jesus was gathering his countrymen around him, and amazing them by his miracles though no less by his doctrines? It was only that for which he had longed—that which was required to prove that his own commission was Divine, and to make it of any worth. "What!" he seems to say to his followers, "are you indeed envious for my success? Would you have had me unsurpassed in the office of teacher? Think you that the baptism with which I have baptized, and the repentance which I have preached, are sufficient for the spiritual wants of a world lying in wickedness? The austerities which by my practice I have enjoined; the duties which by my teaching I have inculcated—think you these alone

will avert wrath, and save the soul from death? No! these must depart: these, like the shadows and ceremonies of the law, must be swept away, as preparatory indeed, and quite important in their place, but nevertheless insufficient, and, therefore, but temporary. My theological system has been imperfect; it has wanted explicitness on points most important to the sinful;—what, then, can await it but the being forgotten and set aside when God shall speak to the world by the mouth of his Son? I behold, then, in this," the Baptist seems to say—"I behold the progress of the Gospel. I mark with prophetic eye the rolling away of all that has been preliminary. The sacrificial rites of the temple are abolished; the penances and the fastings—these are pronounced ineffectual, and every doctrine gives place to that of which Christ Jesus shall be at once the teacher and the theme. I behold this doctrine abolishing the idols; I behold it purifying the heart, till at length all other systems are destroyed; and the vast globe, in its every department, worshipping the one God through one Mediator between God and man. Yes! this is the vision which passes before me as I direct my gaze to future times—the vision of all that has been introductory in the Divine dealings with man shrinking from the scene, that the message of reconciliation which Christ will publish may pass through the world—everywhere opposing falsehood, and everywhere at length triumphant. The prophets are silent; but the Spirit of prophecy is the testimony to Jesus; and Jesus having come, there is no need of further witness. Types are abolished; they did but prefigure Christ; what purpose can they answer when he whom they represented hath shown himself to the world? And whilst the law and the prophets thus resign to Christ the office of Teacher; whilst Moses and Elias bow before him confessing their part fulfilled, and rejoicing that a greater hath descended to reveal the invisible world, am I to repine that my commission must terminate? Am I to think it matter of complaint that the forerunner, with his imperfect theology, must give place to the Redeemer, who is full of glorious and overwhelming tidings?" Yes, with such inquiries as these might the devoted Baptist answer his envious disciples. Moses, far removed from the promised Messiah, could only breathe a wish for a general outpouring of God's Spirit on the Church; but John, though only the forerunner of Christ, caught clearer views of the Gospel dispensation; and he, therefore, could speak triumphantly of the progress of Christianity, as sweeping away all former dispensations; and could repress envy by the noble acknowledgment—"He must increase, but I must decrease;" whilst Moses could only breathe the universal wish—"Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them."

But now setting apart this day to the commemoration of St. John the Baptist, the Church designs to excite us to imitation of one so illustrious in office, and so admirable in character. Let us, then, take his acknowledgment as to Christ—"He must increase, but I must decrease;" and see, in conclusion, whether it ought not to express our own feelings if we be firm and sincere in the Christian religion. It can scarcely be needful for us to tell you—and yet so prone are men to forget elementary truth that they may require to be reminded—that the Gospel is a system constructed on purpose to abase the sinner, and exalt the Saviour. The system may be declared based on the truth, that we are in the condition of beings unable to think or to do anything as of ourselves; while there have been fastened on us, as the entailments of our first parents' sin—moral helplessness and moral perversity, which must prevent our doing aught which can be acceptable to God, and ensure our doing much by which he will be sorely displeased. And until a man be persuaded of this—the foundation truth, as we may call it, of Christianity—there is no hope of bringing him to close thankfully with the proffers of the Gospel; he will see nothing of their utility, and feel nothing of their value. Like remedies offered to a man who is not conscious of sickness, they will appear of little worth, just because they do not meet any felt want or exigence. Hence it is in all

our strivings with the conscience ; in all our endeavours to win over the unconverted—whether on the sick bed, or in the courts of the Lord's house—that our great effort is given to the inculcating the doctrine of human inability ; and if God enable us to bring a man to feel that he can do nothing for himself, he will be just in the attitude in which to hear with eagerness and receive with thankfulness the tidings of a Mediator who has done everything for him. And thus it is virtually our endeavour to gain a cordial acknowledgment of the Baptist's confession, or rather, this confession involves a principle for which we strive at every step to procure admission into the theology of the man whom we long to see walk in the heavenward path. We must bring him to a consciousness that he must think little of himself and highly of Christ ; and if that man pass the straight gate, and enter on the narrow path, it must be even by a certain persuasion in his mind, that Christ “must increase, and he must decrease.” Let each of you, who may be thinking himself a converted man, bring his case to this criterion, and examine with all diligence, and all faithfulness, whether it be his desire—whether it be his experience to seem less and less in his own eyes, and feel more and more of the sufficiency of the Saviour, who is exalted by God. Nay, we might say it results from the very nature of the case, that the glories of Christ are discovered in the same degree as our own vileness and depravity. The more we feel how undeserving and how helpless we are, the more shall we throw ourselves on the exceeding love of God, and be led to cry out in amazement as well as gratitude—“What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the Son of man, that thou visitest him?” The more we perceive the hatefulness of sin, and the immenseness of the wrath which it provoked, the greater will be our sense of the virtues of Christ's death, through which pardon has been placed within reach. In proportion as we feel how entirely unable we are to keep the law in a solitary tittle, shall we look with awe and veneration on One who, though “found in fashion as a man, did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth ;” the greater our consciousness of a defilement which must unfit us for those pure mansions where God displays his brightness, the more intense will be our estimate of those expiatory and sanctifying influences through which alone we can be presented “without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing.” Who knows the worth of a Mediator like he who feels in every recess of his soul that he has destroyed himself and thrown himself at an immeasurable distance from God and from happiness ; and that there he must have remained had no Intercessor come “to seek and to save that which was lost?” In short, to whom will Jesus be so nearly “all in all” as to the man who is most nearly emptied of self? “He must increase and I must decrease” is what every true Christian will desire to be able to say with more and more of the gladness and confidence of the Baptist. “I must decrease!”—I must be more humble under a sense of sin ; I must have yet lower thoughts of my own moral powers, and deeper views of my own vileness as an alien from God. “But he must increase!”—The fulness which there is in Christ must be more and more perceived—the sufficiency of his sacrifice ; the cleansing power of his blood ; the prevalence of his intercession ;—these must be increasingly recognised and confided in ; and though Christ cannot become greater in himself, he must become greater in my esteem ; and with a warmer love and a stronger faith must I daily proclaim him “chief among ten thousand and altogether lovely.”

And does there yet remain no other sense in which the Baptist's words may be applied? Are there no tongues but our own on which they are appropriate? The words were prophetic : they echoed, as we before said, the prediction of Isaiah—“Of the increase of his government there shall be no end.” The whole of this creation seems to me to catch the sentiment and to be vocal with its utterance. The sun coming forth as a bridegroom from his chamber proclaims—“He must increase, but I must decrease.” These heavens are to be “rolled up as a scroll,” and the New

Jerusalem is to have no need of the sun, for the glory of God will lighten it, and the Lamb will be the light thereof. The moon and the stars take up the proclamation; there is to be no night in that city; and therefore must they wholly vanish, quenched by the effulgence of him who will for ever scatter all darkness. And what sound is that which comes rolling from thousand times ten thousand voices? It is the utterance of every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, pronouncing—"Worthy! worthy! is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power, and honour, and worship, and glory, and blessing." Then all orders of intelligence—angel and archangel, principalities and powers, are bowing before the Mediator, and exalting him whilst they abase themselves. And what then is that mighty chorus which John the Evangelist heard, but the echo of those words which John the Baptist uttered—"He must increase!" How increase! Yes, "King of kings," thou must reign till thou shalt put all enemies under thy feet! Every other dominion is to decline. The vision vouchsafed to Daniel may be the completion. Thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion; and thou shalt receive homage from all the creatures of God.

Here indeed we are launched on an ocean without a shore. There may be throughout eternity fresh manifestations of Divinity; but every manifestation, exhibiting, as it must, the dignity and lustre of him "in whom dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead"—we can set no bounds to the increase of Christ. And though we ourselves be ever on the advance, reaching successively to greater heights in knowledge and in happiness, yet may our Redeemer so exceed every creature in growth of all that is glorious, that every creature when brought into comparison with him shall seem to diminish rather than expand. And still, therefore, may it be that in the midst of the unimagined progress or march of eternity, we shall have to speak of ourselves as decreasing, and of Christ alone as increasing. He will be continually separating from us by such broader and broader magnificence, notwithstanding our own growing majesties, that we shall continually think less and less of ourselves, and more and more of him. To exalt him will still be duty, but that duty will be happiness; and we must die and enter into possession of the heavenly inheritance before we can even conjecture with what emotions, contemplating how Christ outshines every creature, so that the most glorious veils his face, we shall seize the golden harps, and sweep them to the strain—"He must increase, but *we* must decrease." The people of God alone can look forward to this blessedness; and with Moses, then, let us pray on behalf of ourselves and others—"Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them."